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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 008110

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: FRUSTRATION MOUNTS AS SUDANESE DEMONSTRATIONS
CONTINUE IN CAIRO

Reference: Cairo 07766

Sensitive but unclassified; Please protect accordingly

1. (SBU) The continuing demonstration by southern Sudanese migrants camped out in a central city park is not a refugee problem but rather a broader humanitarian issue, according to UNHCR Cairo. The demonstration has forced the closure of UNHCR's Cairo office, which adjoins the makeshift camp set-up by the Sudanese (reftel). UNHCR's deputy representative, Damtew Dessalegne, briefed RefCoord on the status of the demonstration this week.

2. (SBU) Most of the Sudanese demonstrators are not recognized refugees, says Dessalegne. The majority arrived 5-10 years ago with no intention of staying in Egypt. But they failed in their bid to gain refugee status and to achieve their principal goal of third-country resettlement and have remained in Cairo over the years clinging to the hope that things would somehow change and third-country resettlement would become a reality. They have survived with the protection of UNHCR's "Yellow Card", issued to registered, but not recognized, asylum seekers and does not permit employment (unlike the "Blue Card" issued to recognized refugees).

3. (SBU) Unlike Blue Card holders (recognized refugees) most of the demonstrators receive no government or UNHCR assistance and survive on illegal employment (if they can find it) and handouts from a few largely overwhelmed churches and charitable organizations. According to UNHCR, there are around 20,000 Sudanese in this situation in Cairo and they see their hopes of moving on fading now that UNHCR has stopped doing refugee status determinations (RSDs), as resettlement opportunities evaporate, and as peace continues to take hold in the south. They are facing what must seem to them, the bleak prospect of returning to their shattered homeland as the only alternative to a continuing hand-to-mouth existence in Cairo.

4. (SBU) According to Dessalegne, the number of demonstrators in the park fluctuates daily between 400-1,200. At midweek there were around 6-700. There has been no violence (although one of the demonstrators died of natural causes in his home in Maadi). UNHCR says the demonstrators were encouraged to come to the park in the mistaken belief that they would be able to exchange their Yellow Cards for Blue Cards and that UNHCR would reopen their files offering the possibility of third country resettlement. UNHCR believes that once the reality that none of this will happen sinks in, the numbers will dwindle and the demonstrators will have dispersed by the end of Ramadan (early November).

5. (SBU) Dessalegne points out that this is no longer a "refugee" problem within the meaning of UNHCR's mandate. The Sudanese are technically free to return home, but few want to. UNHCR says that some demonstrators are new arrivals who continue to come to Egypt on one-month tourist visas looking for resettlement. Sudanese overstayers are not deported when they fall out of status and routinely turn to UNHCR hoping it can regularize their situation in Egypt and provide access to Australia, Canada or the U.S.

6. (SBU) The demonstrators have given UNHCR a long list of demands, most of which are beyond UNHCR's ability to satisfy (e.g., they want all Sudanese arrivals to be recognized as refugees regardless of what part of the country they come from or their individual circumstances; they want UNHCR to 'fast-track' refugee status determinations and resettlement). UNHCR has been through the list point-by-point with the demonstrators pointing out the limitations on its ability to meet their expectations. UNHCR has also urged them to form working groups to focus on individual concerns and offered advice on how some of these concerns can be addressed. But the demonstrators have refused to budge, demanding that UNHCR solve their problems.

17. (SBU) UNHCR has also met twice with the Egyptian Foreign Ministry urging the GOE to accept some responsibility for the welfare of the Sudanese demonstrators. UNHCR apparently pointed out that since it began operations in Cairo in 1994 UNHCR has received 60,000 Sudanese refugee applications; 50,000 have been processed; 32,000 recognized; and 17,000 have been resettled. If the GOE accepted some responsibility for those remaining in Cairo, this would be a good example of burden sharing - 50/50 between Egypt and UNHCR/resettlement countries. But UNHCR left these meetings unconvinced that the GOE was disposed to assist the Sudanese and was instead content to let the present situation drift and hopefully, eventually, to solve itself.

18. (SBU) UNHCR is growing increasingly frustrated that it is seen by the refugee community, and by the media, as the main obstacle to better conditions and third-country resettlement for the Sudanese in Cairo. It notes that since the number of Sudanese in Cairo qualifying for refugee status under UN mandate has virtually dried up, the plight of the Sudanese is no longer a refugee issue and UNHCR is powerless to act.

19. (SBU) UNHCR stresses that although asylum seekers have virtually no access to its office, it continues to be fully operational through the work of the NGOs who act as its implementing partners.

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